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Free For All

In the worlds of education, child nutrition, and government research, the question is snap-crackle-popping loud: Can free breakfast for every student make a difference in how children learn?

This fall, the U.S. Department of Agriculture launched a three-year study to determine whether mandatory breakfast served at school improves children's academic performance. In six districts across the country, entire schools of elementary kids—poor and privileged alike—are chewing Cheerios and muffins and slurping orange juice and milk at government expense. Similar inquiries—most notably in Maryland and Minnesota schools—have suggested that breakfast in all bellies boosts performance. The federal government, however, wants its own test, and some say the results could mean a new national policy.

Congress so far has approved $7 million to cover the first two years of the study, which is taking place in Shelby County, Alabama; Boise, Idaho; Wichita, Kansas; Santa Rosa, California; the Washington Elementary School District in Phoenix; and the Harrison County School District in Gulfport, Mississippi. Department officials say lawmakers might consider a broader government- sponsored free breakfast program if they see improved attendance, test scores, and cognitive development at these sites. "Those are compelling reasons to look at it and say this is what's best for children in this country," says Shirley Watkins of the USDA.

Many people who work with children have long argued that kids with empty stomachs are more likely to act up in class and less likely to concentrate. "You wouldn't get in a car without gas; why do we expect our bodies to get going without breakfast?" asks Linda Godfrey, child-nutrition program specialist for the Shelby County schools. In the mid-1960s, the federal government began providing free or reduced-price breakfasts (not to mention lunches) to low-income children at schools; today, the USDA says, 7 million kids qualify.

But not all of these children eat the breakfasts they're offered. According to food-service workers, kids often pass on the free meals because they're ashamed of taking handouts. Making a no-cost meal available to every student would erase the stigma, advocates argue, and it makes sense in a hurry-up-gotta-go world where kids often skip breakfast. Even in many middle-class and well-to-do families, "both parents have to get to jobs, or students have to take care of siblings," says Shirley Kane, an administrator in the Baltimore schools.

The federal research will look at not only how students fare under a universal free breakfast program but also at how schools manage the logistics, says **J. Michael Murphy, an assistant professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School. Murphy, a principal investigator in the federal study, is no newcomer to these issues, having examined breakfast programs in several school districts. In 1997, he led a key study in six Baltimore elementary schools that linked universal free breakfast with increased attendance, higher test scores, and improved discipline.** Those findings helped propel

interest in broader studies, such as the national one now under way, but Murphy says he and his colleagues aren't the ones lobbying for federal attention. "We're pure researchers," he says, adding that the school food-service industry and child-nutrition advocates have "taken the science and done something with it."

Bolstered by the Harvard research and supported by a local foundation, Baltimore now offers a voluntary universal free breakfast program in 54 elementary and middle schools. One educator who praises the idea is David Clapp, principal of the preK-8 Barclay School, where 92 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Prior to signing up for the program three years ago, **Clapp sent children to the cafeteria for a glass of juice or a graham cracker if they couldn't concentrate in class.** "Some of the kids might not have eaten since lunch at school the day before," he says. Now, **Barclay students eat breakfast in homerooms with their teachers—a routine that has had "a calming effect" on kids, says Clapp: With breakfast waiting, they rarely dally in hallways before school or kick up mischief**. **At the new federal sites this fall—which include schools in middle- class and affluent neighborhoods—educators are dealing with the details: Where should kids eat—cafeteria, classroom, or bus? When should they eat—before school or during homeroom? And what should they eat—hot breakfasts like sausage and biscuits or cold foods such as cereal? "At first, we all had nightmares, because there was so much to think through," says Peg Hill, principal of Shelby County's Elvin Hill Elementary, where 560 children dine in their homerooms. A few days into the program, though, Hill proclaims the effort "easier than we imagined." She says kids definitely are eating—"One teacher said there wasn't a scrap left."** But there's still some fine-tuning to do. One change in the works: eliminating entrees with maple syrup. "The teachers were going wild because it was sticking to their papers," Hill says.

Of course, assigning breakfast duty to America's schools wouldn't be popular among those who worry that K-12 education houses too many social services. Nor would it be cheap to serve 47 million breakfasts each day. Murphy says, "The toughest critics to convince will be those who ask why U.S. taxpayers should pay for the breakfast of average or upper middle-income kids."

Murphy expects the federal study's evaluation team to issue a progress report late in 2001. He predicts the conclusions will closely resemble those he found in **Baltimore—a 2 percentage-point gain in test scores and a half-day per year gain in attendance. The cost, he says, will likely run $100 per student per year. "Congress and the taxpayers will have to decide whether the gains are worth the price," Murphy says. "Done right, it's a relatively inexpensive intervention."**

—Jo Anna Natale